AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

48. "LIGHT RESISTANCE"

My new squad leader is Roy Kaminske, the heroic corporal of Raon L'Etape, now a veteran sergeant. His boyish face is haggard and haunted.

I am second gunner; the first gunner is personable Laddy Keblusek; round face and high cheekbones mark his Polish ancestry. He looks better fed, and not as tired as the others; he is younger, and has been with the platoon only a few weeks and has already earned a Bronze Star.

Next to these men, I feel fresh and ready to go in spite of (or because of) the past 6 weeks of inactivity. The feeling stays with me only for a few hours this morning of January 8, 1944.

In the predawn dark, we move out. Laddy carries the tripod, and I carry a "light" air-cooled 30 caliber machine gun, borrowed from a rifle company. A week earlier, our "heavy" water-cooled guns were abandoned in the woods behind the German lines.

We head East from Siersthal on a dirt road covered with packed snow; then we turn left, North, and follow a path into the woods where the loose snow is over a foot deep.

Two tanks rumble past behind us on the road. We look for them to support our attack, but they roll on down the hill to our right. Gradually the rumble of the tanks fades away.

Riflemen spread out ahead of us and move cautiously from tree to tree. We break new trails through the snow, and the advance goes quietly for about a mile. I try to step in the first gunner's footprints; German mines are in our path.

As dawn breaks, the quiet is shattered by small arms fire ahead of us. I burrow into the snow, hugging the ground. From under my helmet I watch the first gunner snuggling up to a tree; and beyond, a standing rifleman is firing from behind another tree. The sky changes from a rosy dawn to a cold cobalt blue while the riflemen fire at a position straight ahead of where we lay in the snow. We cannot see what they are shooting at.

Mortar rounds slip through the trees and burst in the snow near us. One round explodes close to my left, fortunately on the other side of a big tree trunk. I had been too busy to think, but now I think of Bob Howell, and I see the image of Margarito's leg stump pointing at me. There are worse things than death. I recall

the boredom at the hospital, and how I yearned to be back with the platoon. Now the warm safe hospital is a very good place to be.

Cold fear falls like a blanket over my unprotected back. It envelopes me while the firing continues, it penetrates and links with the cold from the snow. Mortar shells fall a little farther away. We do not have a field of fire for the gun; our riflemen are between us and the enemy. There is nothing to do but lie still and wait. And be chilled by fear and cold.

Distant shouting is echoed by closer calls; "CEASE FIRE!" The riflemen stop firing and move warily from behind their trees. We pick up our weapons and follow them. German soldiers file out of a large dugout; hands on their bare heads. They have abandoned their helmets, their uniforms are clean; they look freshly scrubbed, well fed and happy to be leaving the war. A POW camp will be safer than where we are going.

As we pass their dugout I look back; it is cleverly built into the reverse side of the hill. Parked between dirt walls, almost inside the rear entrance, and covered with camouflage netting, is a strange little car; a military Volkswagen. Years later we learn that our little force of 52 men took 99 prisoners that morning.

Continuing the advance, we follow a path that bends to the left along the crest of the hill. To our right are valleys and hills, to our left, dense woods. We stumble onto a series of dugouts, almost hidden by the new snow. They are the same ones that were abandoned a week before. Our squad moves into one; it is covered with logs and dirt and snow. A big water-cooled 30 caliber machine gun is still there. We find no booby-traps or mines, no tracks in the snow but our own. We have recaptured Spitzberg Hill.

The gun is ready to use; the water jacket is full of antifreeze. The bolt works. We load a belt of ammo and fire a few rounds to test the gun. I borrow the squad leader's binoculars and stand hidden by a tree a little higher on the slope, behind the gun. Scanning the hills, I see a column of Germans hurrying through the woods; but when I get down behind the gun, they are out of sight.

Lt. Witt checks our position and I show him where the Germans are still moving through the woods. They must be a half mile away; little figures in the woods; we can barely see them without the binoculars. Lt. Witt picks up the water-cooled gun with its tripod and ammo (easily 115 pounds), moves to where

he can see the Germans, and fires a half a belt while holding the gun at his hip. He sets the gun down in front of my hole, checks the field of fire, and then leisurely walks away. We retreat into the dugout as mortar rounds burst in the trees around us.

After dark we take turns going back through the woods and down into a little draw where our jeep brings a hot meal and our bedrolls. That night, we have three men in the hole; one hour on and two off! What luxury!

Bill Eckard of Co. H, 397th, writes:

"I was hit in the left leg as we attacked Raon L'Etape, spent a week or two in the Epinal Hospital until December 26; worked my way through the Repple Depples, arriving in Rimling on January 6. ... I fired more rounds and did more damage during those few days (January 8 & 9, 1945) than the rest of the war. John Barnes was there and drove me and my prisoner out - I had a sprained foot. Jack, as we called him, doesn't remember much of that final act at Rimling. It's odd, but it will stick in my mind forever - Jack trying to start a jeep in the early night - it had not been started for about 4 days - we couldn't get out of the house because we were completely cut off. Anyway, it all worked, thanks to him. After Rimling we went to the town of Forbach, I think it's west of Bitche."

The Germans gamble heavily against the 100th Division, as described by Eckard (above) and the following Presidential Unit Citation. Reportedly, Co. H, 397th, is the smallest unit ever to receive this citation, which reads:

"Co. H, 397th Regiment is cited for outstanding accomplishment in combat on 8 and 9 January, 1945, in the vicinity of Rimling, France. Under the pressure of a savagely prosecuted attack by numerically superior hostile forces which forced back adjacent elements, Company H staunchly held its ground, threw back assault after assault, and by its gallant and unyielding defense prevented encirclement of the battalion by the enemy. The initial hostile attack in the night by infantry mounted on tanks was dispersed by the deadly fire of the company's heavy machine guns and mortars, and subsequent daylight tank infantry attacks were also repulsed with heavy losses to the enemy. Attempts at infiltration by hostile soldiers wearing American parkas were thwarted and the opposing riflemen killed or forced to withdraw. Sixty three prisoners were captured ... and an estimated four hundred casualties inflicted upon the attackers in the heroic action ..."

(Eckard was evacuated with yellow jaundice after the March 15 attack.)

January 9; We scan through the trees, expecting a counterattack. Artillery shells from both sides pound the woods ahead of us, behind us, to the right and left, and, too often, burst in the trees overhead.

At mid morning I am on watch behind the gun when riflemen to our left begin firing. I glimpse German troops, through the trees to our left front. Their white camouflage is marked by the black lines of their weapons. They walk, crouching, and firing towards our lines on our left flank. Their white suits blend with the snow but mark them against the black tree trunks. I sight our heavy machine gun and fire a burst. The Germans disappear as they hit the ground or retreat behind the trees. The firing stops as we look in vain for any further sign of the enemy.

Fifty yards to the left front of my gun is a poorly built dugout, open to the front and rear, and now manned by a lonely rifleman. The rifle platoon leader asks us to send someone to share the hole, to beef up our line of resistance. I take the light machine gun and a box of ammo, Roy brings the tripod and another ammo box. We set up the machine gun, I load it, and Roy scrambles back to his dugout which he shares with an ammo bearer. The rifleman is both younger and more frightened than I am.

January 10: from behind us, a fresh battalion sweeps through our lines; riflemen with fixed bayonets; followed by machine gunners like ourselves. In the woods to our front they are caught by a barrage of our own 105 mm shells. The shells have proximity fuses and burst in the air or in the tree tops scattering shrapnel into the troops.

We hear German burp guns and the deeper cough of M-1 rifles and BARs, dueling, unseen in the woods. Then the battalion is pulled back; they bring some of their casualties with them and continue past us to the rear. German mortar shells and machine gun bursts follow them.

Now the enemy mortar shells fall around us. We hear the coughs of the distant mortar tubes, then shrill whines and the explosions. The closer they come, the shorter the whine. There is not much warning of a near hit. The rifleman panics; "We'll be killed if we stay here!" I try to soothe him; "We'll be OK in here! Stay back in the corner! - The logs and dirt will stop the shrapnel!"

I am not so sure myself; - a direct hit would collapse our shelter, and the

two openings leave us doubly exposed to stray shrapnel. Firing continues from unseen German positions ahead in the woods. I only see the trees, and survivors of the shattered battalion may still be out there.

The decimated battalion is barely out of sight to our rear when our own artillery shells burst around us. A white phosphorous shell explodes in the tree above my machine gun. Burning pieces of phosphorous dance and sizzle in the snow, so close that we could reach out and touch them. The rifleman picks up his rifle and starts out of the rear opening; "I'm getting outa here!" I grab him, pull him back into the hole, sit on him and shout into his ear: "It's safer here!" He squirms and whimpers, and stays.

The evacuation of the stricken battalion resumes, occasionally marked by familiar cries; "MEDIC! Over here, MEDIC!" "MEH-DICK -HELP!" At dark we still hear the cries while we take turns slipping back behind the hill for a hot meal. All night the cries of agony echo through the woods; "MEDIC! OOOH MEDIC! - HELP! -HEELLP - MEH-DEEK!" We are ordered to stay in our holes; patrols have found that the Germans are calling for medics, and shooting at anyone who responds.

After dark, we watch for patrols. Ours and theirs are both out there in no man's land. The woods grow quiet and so cold that the trees make loud cracking sounds; perhaps the sap is freezing. Each sound stirs a new desperate alert. In our hole, the man on watch has a pistol, rifle and machine gun, all loaded, cocked, safeties off; ready to fire.

The rifleman and I alternate watches, but we get no respite from the cries that continue through the night. Far behind us the night is aglow from giant floodlights; "artificial moonlight." Still it is so dark that I hold my cocked pistol ready when I am on watch. There is no way I could move the machine gun or the rifle if someone were to fall upon me in the dark. At intervals, a flare falls in the woods ahead of us; we freeze motionless in the glare; searching, moving only our eyes, looking for intruders.

Before dawn we abandon our lonely outpost and the rifleman rejoins his platoon. We turn in the light machine gun to the jeep driver who brings breakfast. Back at the heavy machine gun position, a field phone is installed in our hole; and we learn that snipers have hit several riflemen. We are told that regardless of calls for medics, there are no more of our troops to our front.

This day is a little quieter. We listen for the distant cough of the mortars and

move back in the dugout to escape shrapnel when the rounds hit the trees overhead. We know the sounds: our 105 mm artillery and 60 or 81 mm mortars; their 88 mm cannon and 50 or 80 mm mortars. The ratio seems to hold; about 15 to 20 rounds go out for each one coming in. Firing continues all day. Some of our rounds fall short; a 105 mm shell hits the edge of our dugout; I am sitting inside when it bursts, not more than 2 feet from my head. My ears ring from the concussion, but the frozen dirt and logs stopped all of the fragments.

We use empty C-ration cans to catch and dump urine, but defecation involves dangerous exposure; usually reserved for night. To leave the hole in the daytime, one rolls quickly over the back opening; crouches and runs for cover in the woods. No one in our holes uses a helmet as a chamber pot, as reported by others in the Vosges.

After dark and before dawn we take turns going back to the sheltered little valley for hot food and hot coffee. A pipeline of hot coffee and a hot shower would be heaven! Again, machine gun bullets whisper through the tree limbs overhead. "They" seem to know where the mess jeep is, and when it comes, but the bullets do not drop into the sheltered draw. The jeep driver is anxious to leave as soon as everyone is fed.

We hang a blanket to separate the covered dugout from the opening by the gun. Now there are three of us; one hour on and two off. Not bad! The two sleepers are so crowded that they must turn over at the same time!

I am roused from sleep by the man I am to relieve; he lights a candle while I bundle up and put on my pistol belt. I crawl over to the hanging blanket and whisper: "Put the candle out!" He shields it with his hand and I slip under the blanket. A light blinks over my shoulder.

Furious because I think the light came from the candle, I move quickly behind the gun, and my foot strikes something in the bottom of the hole. I pick it up; it feels like a metal goose egg with a raised seam around it. I hold it inside the blanket. "What the Hell is this?" "IT'S A KRAUT GRENADE! GIT IT THE HELL OUTA HERE!" I turn and throw the grenade, blind, in the dark, remembering where there is a gap in the trees. Nothing happens.

"WHERE IS HE?" The woods are silent. Nothing stirs while I strain my eyes and ears. All night I ponder; "How could he have gotten so close? What would have happened if it had not been a dud? Why did my buddy take time to insert "THE HELL" in the middle of his warning?" The half second might have been fatal if the grenade fuse had been alive. Maybe the candle light killed my night vision.

The next evening near dusk I venture out again, and peer out from behind the tree above the dugout. With the binoculars I see a column of Germans lined up at what looks to be a horse drawn mess cart. I pick out a tree which marks their location and then scramble down behind the gun and sight it on the tree.

A twig snaps behind me and I whirl with drawn pistol; it is our old Company Commander, now acting as Battalion commander. I give him the binoculars and show him where the Germans are still busy dishing chow. I tell him about where the gun is sighted. He looks, then hands me the binoculars and says, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

I crouch behind the gun and fire about half a belt, maybe a hundred rounds, while traversing the gun around the tree landmark. Then I look back to where the Captain had been standing, and the forest is quite empty. I duck back into the dugout as mortar shells burst in the tree above us.

The other gunner asks: "What was that all about?" And when I tell him, he thinks it is pretty funny that the Captain vanished so quickly. It is the first, but not the last time that I see Captain Derryberry at the front.

That night I return from the chow jeep to find a new neighbor. During my absence of a half-hour or less, a rifleman has killed a German soldier, not 20 yards away from our gun. In the commotion of men going to eat, our gunner did not see the German approaching our hole, but a rifleman did. I wonder if it is the same man who dropped the grenade in our hole the night before.

Trees move in the wind and their moonlight shadows shift across the figure lying still in the snow, so that he appears to move. I know that he is quite dead, for the medic checked him. We will not jeopardize a recovery team to bring a fallen foe from this exposed position. He will keep well enough in the bitter cold.

To the left of our dugout, we see 3 or 4 dugouts, spaced 40 to 50 yards apart and manned by riflemen. Beyond them, out of sight, is the dugout housing the other gun of our section. To our right we look down a steep wooded hillside with no more friendly positions in sight. We seem to be at the end of the line. So at night, any sound on the hillside below is assumed to be hostile. And one night I hear a scrape - scrape sound, like someone walking.

The grenade was touted by our training instructors as a good weapon to use at night since "there is no revealing muzzle blast." I pull the pin from a grenade and lob it down the hill in the direction of the sounds, ducking down in the hole in one motion. To my amazement the grenade fuse leaves a trail of sparks from my hand to the explosion which I see only as a flash of light against the trees. Then

the quiet returns, broken only by the distant sounds of gunfire and artillery. At dawn I look where the grenade exploded; a tree limb, broken by shell fire, is swinging in the freshening wind; the sound is suddenly very familiar.

Not far from us, PFCs Paul Costello and Charles Wunderlich are carrying hot food containers across a bare field when shells hit the edge of the field. One bursts right in front of them; Charles jumps into a ditch on top of a mortally wounded German soldier and Paul is felled by numerous shrapnel hits. Seeing Paul lying exposed, bleeding and unconscious on the ground, Charles picks him up and carries him to the jeep. Only then does Charles see blood oozing from his own pants leg, and they both wind up in the hospital. Paul recovers and returns to the front, wondering what happened to Charles (who was sent back to the States). At a 1987 Division reunion, Paul is amazed to find that Charles is still alive, and finally thanks Charles for saving his life.

Sgt. Roy Kaminske is fighting an illness. Finally, the medic orders him back to the hospital. Before leaving, he confides: "I've been pissing blood in the snow!" He has yellow jaundice. I turn over my pistol to an ammo bearer who becomes the new gunner. Roy takes the ammo bearer's carbine to the rear. I am acting squad leader, complete with Roy's rifle. Scattered sniper, mortar and artillery fire keeps us in our holes until the night of January 15 when the first battalion relieves us.

Back at Siersthal we get showers, clean clothes, mail, and the "Stars and Stripes;" the Army's newspaper. The lead story tells about a major breakthrough by the Third Army, and then near the bottom of the page: "The Seventh Army moved to straighten the front lines against light resistance." It seemed pretty heavy to me.

49. THE VILLAGE

Somehow, we spend about two weeks on the front and only two or three days in reserve. No doubt the other three battalions have the same problem, and maybe part of the problem is that a battalion cannot leave until the fresh battalion is in place; so both battalions count that day as a day on the front.

Those few days in reserve are like heaven, walking in the streets of Siersthal; getting showers and clean clothes, three hot meals, and sleeping indoors, warm and dry. After a night or two inside, my hips and shoulders get sore from

sleeping on the hard floor. In the dugouts we smooth little depressions in the ground and we are padded with winter clothing.

We talk with the villagers. The native language here is German. A few of us are from German parents or studied German in college. Ironically, our Jewish soldiers can translate, finding that German is similar to Yiddish.

A barber is cutting my hair when I learn two new words from a watching schoolgirl; "Dicht und schmutzig!" "What did she say?" "She says it is THICK and DIRTY!" Well, I did understand the "und!" And she's right about my hair: "sehr (very) dicht und schmutzig!"

We are walking to the "mess hall" late in the afternoon. Overhead the blue sky is speckled with returning American B-17's heading for England, and threading a maze of antiaircraft fire. Siersthal is so close to German positions that their antiaircraft shells are bursting, maybe 15,000 feet ABOVE US!

One bomber is hit and peels away to the west, safe behind our lines, if they get out before the crash. A piece of antiaircraft shrapnel lands near where I am standing, watching the incredible tableau. The jagged piece of metal, about as big as a half dollar, sizzles in the snow.

Bigger pieces must be falling; we go on to chow, but not until the last bomber is out of sight, the firing has stopped, and a lazy trail of black smoke appears where the stricken plane vanished.

Late afternoon, we pack to return to the front that night, well after dark. I show the squad how to put a new barrel in the machine gun. The old barrel looks pretty good, but someone has decided to replace it; maybe because it sat out in the woods for weeks without being oiled every day. Then too, it was not cleaned after Lt. Witt and I had fired a total of several hundred rounds through it. And I have no idea how much this gun has been used in the last two months!

The new gun barrel is full of Cosmoline; a black preservative. More like asphalt than grease; it is hard when cold. I warm the barrel next to the stove and finally get a ramrod to carry a cleaning patch through to the chamber.

One of our ammo bearers watches me install the barrel, and moves close to my side. At 27 he is the oldest man in the squad; maybe the oldest in the platoon. A recent draftee, he is good-humored, and well liked. Quietly, he says: "Frank, I'm not going back with you." Amazed, I put down the gun barrel; "What?" This is unheard of; what will they do to him?

"I'm not going back. I've got two little girls at home, and I want to live to see them again. I want to get back to them with enough of me left to be able to

take care of them." He shows me their picture. Little charmers!

I think how lucky I am still to be single; the thought of leaving a family; or worse, coming home crippled, to be a burden - but I say: "I can't do anything about it, you'd better talk to the Lieutenant."

I install the packing around the gun barrel and fill the jacket with antifreeze: "GI" Prestone, in cans painted olive drab. My mind follows the ammo bearer; men have been shot for less! We miss him later that night when we move out to relieve another battalion on the front.

I need not have worried; our understanding Company Commander assigns him to permanent KP for the rest of the war. Our kitchen is seldom out of artillery range, but it is almost never hit and has few - or no casualties. He also serves ... -- and what he did that day was an act of courage and love.

In the middle of the night, carrying our guns and bedrolls to the front, we are almost to our new positions when we pass a dead white horse and trees, splintered by shell fire.

I think of the options, of going home proud of my service; in shame as a deserter; or more likely, disabled or not at all.

The kitchen seems like a good place to be.